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Letter dated 18 January 2002 from the Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Upon instructions from my Government, I have the honour to transmit herewith a speech by Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, at a ceremony marking the conclusion of disarmament in Sierra Leone today, Friday, 18 January 2002 (see annex).

I should be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be issued as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Ibrahim M. **Kamara**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex to the letter dated 18 January 2002 from the Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Speech by the President of Sierra Leone, His Excellency Alhaji Dr. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, at the ceremony marking the conclusion of disarmament and the destruction of weapons, delivered at Lungi, 18 January 2002

Never before since March 1996 when I took the solemn oath of office to lead this nation have I been so moved by a public ceremony as the one we are witnessing here today. It is indeed an honour and a great privilege for me to stand here and serve as host for this awe-inspiring declaration of peace in Sierra Leone.

Not too long ago, the flames of war were mercilessly consuming thousands of innocent lives and countless property in several parts of our country. Today, we are happy that those flames of war have been extinguished, and that now we are about to watch the flames of peace destroy some of the implements of war. What a relief! The ceremony marks the symbolic conclusion of the disarmament process, and an historic expression of our deep sense of national triumph.

The presence of some of my colleagues, President John Kufour and so many Foreign and Defence Ministers underscores the significance of the occasion. I should, therefore, on behalf of the people of Sierra Leone and on my own personal behalf, start by extending a warm welcome to you all. We also welcome the Executive Secretary of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Dr. Mohamed Chambers, and high level representatives of other leaders and heads of organizations who would have also liked to join us here today but were unable to do so because of pressing commitments. I have no doubt that they also associate themselves with the spirit of this ceremony.

The conflict that has just formally ended was essentially an internal conflict. However, no one should underestimate its regional and international dimensions and implications. So let me touch briefly on the roles of ECOWAS, the United Nations and the rest of the international community.

Today, as we celebrate the dawn of lasting peace and security in Sierra Leone, we are also symbolically erecting a new milestone on the road to peace and stability in the West African subregion. The events in the past 10 to 12 years have shown that the proverbial "we are our neighbour's keeper" has become more relevant to the situation in our subregion.

To our sister States of ECOWAS, it is an understatement to say that you have given true meaning to the concept of collective regional security. The mandate that ECOWAS received from the United Nations Security Council in resolution 1132 (1997), under Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations, to enforce and monitor implementation of the arms and oil embargo against the rebel-military junta, was a landmark decision. It was an acknowledgement of the capacity of ECOWAS as an instrument of conflict resolution in the international system. It turned out to be one of the stepping stones towards the peace process in Sierra Leone.

I should like to pay special tribute to those States members of ECOWAS that have advanced the cause of peace in Sierra Leone as troop contributors to the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), in particular, Nigeria, Guinea, Ghana and Mali, or as facilitators and hosts of peace talks, especially Côte d'Ivoire and Togo. To other States of the Community that demonstrated their solidarity with the people of Sierra Leone throughout the conflict, we salute you.

We remember those ECOMOG soldiers who made the supreme sacrifice of giving up their own lives to that our children can live in peace. We renew our assurances to their families and respective Governments that their memories will forever remain in our hearts. I would like to reassure you that every Sierra Leonean knows that without ECOWAS and its monitoring group, ECOMOG, the prospects for disarmament and peace would have been extremely bleak.

Let me, however, point out that, notwithstanding the resounding success of ECOWAS in Sierra Leone, the organization is facing a serious challenge to its principal mission, namely, "to promote regional integration in all fields of economic activity". There are still elements of threats to peace in our subregion. These include the illicit transfer of arms and ammunition, the illicit trade in diamonds and other natural resources to fuel or prolong armed conflict and in the process wreak havoc on innocent and defenceless civilians. These cruel and destabilizing activities are an anomaly. They continue to impede development. They must be eliminated so that we can devote all our energy, collectively, to the task of lifting our peoples out of the bondage of abject poverty.

As we watch a collection of arms and ammunition go up in flames, we must remind ourselves of the need to faithfully respect the ECOWAS moratorium on the importation, exportation and manufacture of light weapons in West Africa. We must see the moratorium as both a security mechanism and a catalyst of economic and social development in West Africa. Sierra Leone wholeheartedly endorsed the action taken last July to extend the moratorium for another three years.

Excellencies, please allow me on this occasion to appeal to all members of ECOWAS and the inter-State groupings within the Community for a new commitment, not only to the principles of good neighbourliness, but, more importantly, to the ideals of brotherhood. We, the leaders of our respective nations in the subregion, often refer to each other as brothers. Let us use the success that we are celebrating today as a source of inspiration to work harder in strengthening the family and other ties that bind us as one great community of peoples.

Excellencies, distinguished guests:

The people of Sierra Leone are equally grateful to the United Nations and the rest of the international community for their support in making this celebration possible. We acknowledge that long before the outbreak of the rebel war, many of your representatives were here in this country as partners in development, helping us to take care of the health and welfare of our children; working hand-in-hand with our own nationals to construct roads and bridges, equip schools and hospitals and develop high-yielding seeds for greater food production; and building the capacity of Sierra Leoneans to be economically self-sufficient.

In the course of the war, international organizations provided essential humanitarian relief to thousands of Sierra Leonean refugees and the internally displaced. They have also lent their support in rehabilitation and reconstruction

programmes. We must confess, though, that there were times in the course of the armed conflict when many of our people thought that we were being abandoned, or that our cry for help was perhaps not loud enough to prod the world to provide the quality and quantum of response that our precarious situation required. There were other occasions when the average Sierra Leonean felt that repeated requests for urgent international assistance to enable ECOMOG to do the job would never materialize. Secretary-General Kofi Annan once had to make a plea that the international community must not fail the people of Sierra Leone.

However, as I often observe, Sierra Leone has tested the capacity of the United Nations, and indeed the international community, to respond to the major challenges of our times in the areas of peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, the protection of human rights and the administration of justice. Your overall response to those challenges has been extraordinary. This is reflected in the operations of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), in the activities of such agencies as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Children's Fund, and more recently in the decision to establish the Special Court. For these and other forms of assistance, we are profoundly grateful. Without the contribution of the various organizations and agencies, governmental and non-governmental, most of us would not have lived to see this glorious day.

In thanking all countries that have contributed troops and to UNAMSIL, let me also on this occasion renew our expression of deepest sympathy to the families and Governments of the UNAMSIL peacekeepers who lost their lives in the service of the United Nations on our soil.

To the United Nations and the international community, I must reiterate that the process of disarmament is formally over. However, the equally formidable tasks of reintegration and rehabilitation have only just begun. In this connection, I wish to draw your attention to the recent observation by Secretary-General Kofi Annan that "the limited availability of reintegration opportunities for ex-combatants, as a result of inadequate funds, remains a source of serious concern". We could not agree with him more.

The international community cannot afford to create another feeling of abandonment in the minds of Sierra Leoneans, especially the young ex-combatants and those who could be described as non-combatants. We therefore appeal to the international community to remain engaged in our efforts to consolidate the peace in Sierra Leone. We know from experience that the timeliness and level of international assistance often determine the course of events in conflict and post-conflict situations. We continue to count on your support.

Excellencies, distinguished guests:

Sierra Leone has many friends within the international community. But we also have some very very good and faithful friends; friends whom we are obliged to single out for special commendation by name on an occasion such as this. I refer to the United Kingdom, the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. The Governments and peoples of these friendly States deserve separate chapters in the history of our transition from war to peace. As the old adage goes, "a friend in need is a friend indeed".

Now, to you, my compatriots, this is the day we have all been patiently waiting for. As I told you two Sundays ago, the rest of the world has been impressed by our

resilience. Your courage has been exemplary. You fought hard, not merely to defend your right to live but also to uphold the principles of democratic governance and the rule of law. A few individuals declared war and used others to wage and prolong the senseless war. We continue to maintain that your response was an act of legitimate self-defence.

We have learned the hard way that the paths to disarmament and peace are not paved with gold. There was considerable loss of life and destruction of property. We encountered obstacles of various dimensions, such as intransigence, bad faith, greed, fear, apprehension, and, in some instances, financial constraints. There were inordinate delays and detours on the road. Today we can take pride in the fact that we have at last arrived at a stage where for the first time in more than 10 years, we can confidently speak about real peace and security.

This ceremony marking the symbolic conclusion of disarmament, and in celebration of peace, is so important for every one of us that we intend to replicate it in other parts of the country over the next several days. Many of those who are not present here today will also have the opportunity to witness and be part of the celebration of this dramatic change in the history of Sierra Leone.

Fellow compatriots, as the celebration continues, we are about to face our first major challenge in the area of peaceful political transition, namely presidential and parliamentary elections. The elections will test our ability to apply the new culture of peace that we recently embraced in our relations with each other. The forthcoming electoral process will test our patriotism, our determination to put armed conflict behind us and to renounce violence as a means of bringing about political or any other change in this country. If we really appreciate peace, we should live and practice peace.

Let me take this opportunity to reiterate that an election is not a war. The war is over. What we are about to embark upon is a friendly contest. Election is a process by which we should freely and peacefully choose those who we believe are qualified to assume the heavy responsibility of serving this nation.

I am confident that, guided by the lessons of the past 10 years and inspired by this symbolic but momentous occasion we are witnessing today, the forthcoming elections will be free and fair, and will be the most peaceful in the history of our beloved country.

Fellow compatriots, another test that we must pass is in the area of reconciliation and justice. We must recognize that justice and reconciliation are major components of peace. Furthermore, the administration of justice is an integral part of the process of national reconciliation. If we really want to consolidate the peace, if we really want to facilitate the process of national reconciliation, we must be prepared to deal effectively with the trauma, the emotional pain resulting from that bitter conflict. One principal institution designed for this purpose is of course the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We should all look forward to its proceedings and the outcome of its work.

And speaking of reconciliation brings me to the issue of the Special Court, which, I must emphasize, is part of the process of national reconciliation. One cannot speak about the need for national reconciliation and at the same time ignore or dismiss the moral and constitutional imperative of upholding the rule of law. The Special Court is about accountability. It is about justice. I should add, however, that

justice is not merely an act of punishment, of revenge or of retribution. In our situation it is a means of dealing with impunity. It is also a means of ensuring that at all times, the human rights of every individual, including those who are caught up in armed conflict, are respected and protected.

Excellencies, distinguished guests, fellow Sierra Leoneans,

On this auspicious occasion, I have spoken about peace in Sierra Leone and the roles of our subregional organization, the United Nations and the rest of the international community, as well as our own effort in securing the peace that we are here to celebrate. I spoke about arms, about war and about the need for peaceful political change through free and fair elections. I also dwelt on what I consider our collective responsibility to cooperate in consolidating the gains we have made through, among other things, such components of peace as justice, the rule of law, protection of human rights, national reconciliation and the maintenance of an open society.

I must pause here to explain the concept of an open society. An open society and civil society are often confused with each other. Actually, a healthy civil society is part of an open society, but only a part. We are told that an open society also needs a democratic government and a private sector that is independent of the government. To safeguard these elements it needs the rule of law.

We must note, however, that peace and reconciliation cannot be imposed, cannot be decreed and cannot be established by legislation or by commission. Peace and forgiveness must come from the hearts and minds of the people concerned, namely, us Sierra Leoneans.

Excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen:

The main thrust of my remarks could be summarized in the following profound words of wisdom from His Holiness Pope John Paul II. They were addressed to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See four years ago this month. His Holiness said:

> "If violent attainment of power becomes the norm, if insistence on ethnic consideration continues to override all concerns, if democratic representation is systematically put aside, if corruption and arms trade continue to rage, then Africa will never experience peace and development, and future generations will mercilessly judge these pages of African history."

The message was for Africa, from someone of high repute who sees himself as a friend of Africa. I believe that it is also appropriate for this particular gathering.

Thank you once again for your presence and support in our continued search for sustainable peace, security and the development of this country.